

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2009

Remarks on Presenting the Presidential Unit Citation to Alpha Troop, 1st Squadron, 11th Armored Cavalry

October 20, 2009

Please be seated. Good afternoon, everybody, and welcome to the White House. And welcome to a moment nearly 40 years in the making. Now, last month, I was privileged to present the parents of an American soldier, Sergeant First Class Jared Monti, with our Nation's highest decoration for valor, the Medal of Honor. Today we celebrate the awarding of our Nation's highest honor for a military unit, the Presidential Unit Citation.

The Presidential Unit Citation is awarded for "gallantry, determination, and esprit de corps in accomplishing its mission under extremely difficult and hazardous conditions." And since its creation during the Second World War, it has only been bestowed about 100 times. Today another unit assumes its rightful place in these ranks: Alpha Troop, 1st Squadron, 11th Armored Cavalry, the legendary Blackhorse Regiment.

To mark this occasion we're joined by Congressman—and Vietnam veteran—Leonard Boswell; Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Jim "Hoss" Cartwright; John McHugh, our Army Secretary; and Vice Chief of Staff Peter Chiarelli; from Fort Irwin, California, leaders of today's 11th Armored Cavalry, Colonel Paul Laughlin and Command Sergeant Major Martin Wilcox; and most of all, the men of Alpha Troop—those behind me and some 100 here today. Now, these men might be a little bit older, a little bit grayer, but make no mistake, these soldiers define the meaning of bravery and heroism. It was March 1970, deep in the jungles of Vietnam. And through the static and crackle of their radios, Alpha Troop heard that another unit was in trouble. Charlie Company, from the 1st Cavalry Division, had stumbled upon a massive underground bunker of North Vietnamese troops. A hundred Americans were facing some 400 enemy fighters. Outnumbered and outgunned, Charlie Company was at risk of being overrun. And that's when Alpha Troop's captain gave the order: "Saddle up and move out."

As these men will tell you themselves, this isn't the story of a battle that changed the course of a war. It never had a name, like Tet or Hue or Khe Sanh. It never made the papers back home. But like countless battles, known and unknown, it is a proud chapter in the story of the American soldier.

It's the story of men who came together, from every corner of America, of different colors and creeds; some young—just 18, 19 years old—and just weeks in the jungle; some older—veterans hardened by the ugliness of war; noncommissioned officers who held the unit together and the officers assigned to lead them.

It's the story of how this team of some 200 men set out to save their fellow Americans. With no roads to speak of, they plowed their tanks and armored vehicles through the thick jungle, smashing a path through bamboo and underbrush, mile after mile, risking ambush and landmines every step of the way, and finally emerging from the jungle to the rescue—what one member of Charlie Company called "a miracle."

It's a story of resolve. For Alpha Troop could have simply evacuated their comrades and left that enemy bunker for another day, to ambush another American unit. But as their captain said, "That's not what the 11th Cavalry does."

And so, ultimately, this is a story of what soldiers do, not only for their country but for each other: the troopers who put themselves in the line of fire, using their tanks and vehicles to shield those trapped Americans; the loaders who kept the ammunition coming, and the gunners who never let up; and when one of those gunners went down, the soldier who jumped up to take his place.

It's about the men who rushed out to drag their wounded buddies to safety; the medics who raced to save so many; the injured who kept fighting hour after hour. And finally, with dark falling, as the convoy made the daring escape back through the jungle, these soldiers remained vigilant, protecting the wounded who lay at their feet.

The fog of war makes a full accounting impossible. But this much we know: Among the many casualties that day, some 20 members of Alpha Troop were wounded, and at least 2 made the ultimate sacrifice, their names now among the many etched in that black granite wall not far from here. But because of that service, that sacrifice, Alpha Troop completed its mission: It rescued Charlie Company. It saved those 100 American soldiers, some of who join us today. And those soldiers went on to have families, children and grandchildren who also owe their lives to Alpha Troop.

Now, some may wonder, after all these years, why honor this heroism now? And the answer is simple: Because we must; because we have a sacred obligation. As a nation, we have an obligation to this troop. Their actions that day went largely unnoticed—for decades—until their old captain, John Poindexter, realized that their service had been overlooked. He felt that he had a right to wrong. And so he spent years tracking down his troopers and gathering their stories, filing reports, fighting for the Silver Stars and Bronze Stars they deserved and bringing us to this day. Thank you, John.

We have an obligation to all who served in the jungles of Vietnam. Our Vietnam vets answered their country's call and served with honor. But one of the saddest episodes in American history was the fact that these vets were often shunned and neglected, even demonized, when they came home. That was a national disgrace. And on days such as this, we resolve to never let it happen again.

Many of our Vietnam vets put away their medals, rarely spoke of their service, and moved on. They started families and careers. Some rose through the ranks, like the decorated Vietnam veteran that I rely on every day, my National Security Adviser, Jim Jones.

Indeed, I'm told that today is the first time in 39 years that many from Alpha Troop have pulled out their medals and joined their old troop. Some of you still carry the shrapnel and the scars of that day. All of you carry the memories. And so I say, it's never too late. We can never say it enough: To you and all of those who served in Vietnam, we thank you. We honor your service, and America is forever grateful.

And today also reminds us of our obligations to all our veterans, whether they took off the uniform decades ago or days ago, to make sure that they and their families receive the respect they deserve and the health care and treatment they need, the benefits they have earned and all the opportunities to live out their dreams.

And finally, if that day in the jungle, if that war long ago, teaches us anything, then surely it is this: If we send our men and women in uniform into harm's way, then it must be only when it is absolutely necessary. And when we do, we must back them up with the strategy and the resources and the support they need to get the job done.

This includes always showing our troops the respect and dignity they deserve, whether one agrees with the mission or not. For if this troop and our men and women in uniform can come together, from so many different backgrounds and beliefs, to serve together and to succeed together, then so can we. So can America.

I cannot imagine a more fitting tribute to these men, who fought in what came to be called the "Anonymous Battle." Troopers, you are not anonymous anymore. And with America's overdue recognition also comes responsibility, our responsibility as citizens and as a nation, to always remain worthy of your service.

God bless Alpha Troop and the 11th Armored Cavalry. God bless all those who wear this Nation's uniform. And God bless the United States of America.

Thank you very much, everybody.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:24 p.m. in the Rose Garden at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Paul and Janet Monti, parents of SFC Jared C. Monti, USA, who was killed in action in Afghanistan on June 21, 2006.

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Names: Boswell, Leonard L.; Cartwright, James E. "Hoss"; Chiarelli, Peter W.; Jones, James L., Jr.; Laughlin, Paul J.; McHugh, John M.; Monti, Janet; Monti, Paul; Poindexter, John; Wilcox, Martin E.

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